

AN IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF CULTURAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE FACTORS ON DIFFERENTIAL FERTILITY RATES OF TWO COMMUNITIES

[Muslim immigration to the North East especially to Assam is a comparatively new phenomenon. During British period, their numbers were very few. But today Muslim population in Assam itself has crossed 8.0 million marks forming about 31percent of the total population of the State. Islamic tradition has two distinctly observable traits in Assam. The one that is preserved by the people migrated to Assam during eighteen century who assimilated with the Assamese society in every possible way. This section is concentrated mainly in upper Assam region. The other is prominent among the immigrants who migrated from present neighbouring Bangladesh at different times during the twentieth century and established their residence right from central Assam to the lower Assam region. Apart from being Muslim, these two cultural groups have no common elements among themselves – rather they have unmatched social system of their own. This paper analyses the status of growth of Muslim population in two sets of districts one set in Upper Assam and another in lower Assam. It was found that despite religious homogeneity both the sets differ significantly in respect of their fertility.]

Historical Perspective

The history of Islam in India is more than a thousand years old today. It has blended beautifully into the background of its adopted land and contributed immensely to the formation of a composite Indian culture and the building of the Indian nation. Islam entered India almost in the 7th century A.D and spread into different parts in the subsequent periods. In the south it entered through the state of Kerala. Its carriers were mainly the Arab traders who had been involved in trade activities with India even before the times of Prophet Muhammad. During their numerous voyages to the Malabar region, the Arab traders established matrimonial relationships with the local women and had many progeny from these marriages. This resulted in the spread of Islam to different parts of the region. Many Sufi saints accompanied these traders and under the influence of their preaching and the attraction of an egalitarian faith, many local people, mainly from lower classes, converted to Islam (Kurup, 1991: 80). In the North, Islam came along with the invasion of Muhammad bin Qasim, a general of Yusuf bin Hajjaj, the governor of Iraq during the Umayyad period. (Lal, 1984: 12-17). This was followed by the many invasions of Muhammad Ghori and Mahmud Ghazni.

The Muslims in India are categorized into two distinct classes based on their origins namely, Ashraf and Ajlaf. Ashraf are again grouped as Sayyeds, Sheikhs, Mughals and Pathans. The Ajlaf on the other hand are the Indian converts and are

considered to be of common ancestry. They are considered to be of inferior class when compared to the Ashraf.

Basic Demographic Facts

With the passage of time, Muslim population in India has been growing and its growth is usually remains higher than the growth of non Muslim population. Muslims in India accounted for 9.9 per cent (of nation’s total population) in 1951, 10.8 per cent in 1971 and 11.3 per cent in 1981, 12.45 per cent in percent in 1991 and 13.4 percent in 2001 census. This is quite a significant growth indeed. Among the States, Assam is the second State where proportion of Muslim population is more than 30 percent of the total population of the State. It is still growing and growing at a rapid rate. In the following table States having proportion of Muslim population more than 15 percent are shown. Interestingly almost all the States are having natural growth of Muslim population while Assam is having this growth mainly because of immigration of Bangladeshi population.

Table-1: States Where Muslim Population is More than 15 percent

State & Union Territories	Muslim Population	Proportion to total State Population
India	13.81	13.4
Jammu & Kashmir	06.79	67.0
Uttar Pradesh	30.74	18.5
Bihar	13.72	16.5
West Bengal	20.24	25.2
Assam	08.24	30.9
Laksha dweep	0.005	95.0
Kerala	07.86	27.7

Assam shares its borders with six Indian States and two foreign countries namely Bangladesh and Bhutan. Bangladesh basically a Muslim majority country having huge numbers of unemployed and unfed population. The total geographical area of Assam is about 2.4 percent of the country's geographical area.

The census 2001 records the population of the Assam as 26.64 million which accounts for 2.59 percent of the country's total population. The State has 27 districts which vary considerably in size and population. The sprawling district of Karbi Anglong is nearly eight times as large as Hailakandi district.

The sex ratio of Assam has consistently improved since 1951. There are now 932 women for every 1000 men in the State, compared to 933 per 1,000 for the country as a whole. Significantly, the improvement in Assam has occurred when the sex ratio for the country as whole has been declining. The percentage of poor in Assam is the highest among the seven sister States of the North East. Around 36.09 percent of the State's population continues to live below the poverty line, a figure considerably above the

national average of 26.10 percent (1999-2000). Like any Asian region Assam also has a rural-urban divide; four out of every ten people in rural Assam are likely to be below the poverty line, while in urban Assam, the incidence is less than one in ten.

Muslim population in Assam is growing at a steady rate till 1951. Muslim population in Assam is growing at a steady rate till 1951. Thereafter the rate stabilized between 1951 and 1971. The impact of partition can be visible in the census data of 1951. But thereafter the creation of Pakistan was a new experience and the people who stayed back tried to extract the benefit of a new nation and the newly experienced freedom. But this did not last long. Poor men in this remote part of Pakistan became further poor. Scarce and infertile land complicated their problems; the situation was further complicated by the frequent occurrences of natural calamities.

The 70s was a decade marked by heavy immigration to the State. At the advent of Indo Pak war in 1971 lakhs of refugees fled their homeland East Pakistan to Assam. Government of India made policy to rehabilitate them in India. Not a single State came forward to take the burden of the refugees. Assam was initially made temporary home but the situation had not changed even after creation of Bangladesh. Lakhs of refugees refused to return their home and have made Assam their permanent home.

This has caused a socio-political instability in the State. It may be observed from this table that between 1921 and 1941 there was a steady increase of Muslim population. In 1951 there was a sudden increase, 6.85 lakhs – which can be understandable with reference to partition in 1947. But the increase during 1971 and 1991 which is to the extent of 27.81 lakhs in 20 years is unexplainable. The rate of growth further picked up between 1991 and 2001 which was to the tune of 18.67 lakhs.

Thereafter the rate stabilized between 1951 and 1971. Then there was a sharp increase during 1971 and 2001

Table-2: Growth of Muslim Population in Assam

Year	Population Grew by	Annual Rate	Comment on growth
1911-1921	0.23 million	023000	Normal
1921-1931	0.35 million	035000	Normal
1931-1941	0.36 million	036000	Normal
1941-1951	0.68 million	068000	Normal
1951-1961	0.75 million	075000	Normal
1961-1971	0.85 million	085000	Normal
1971-1991	2.75 million	139000	Abnormal
1991-2000	1.87 million	187000	Abnormal

The Census superintendent (1931) C. S. Mullan wrote in a census report, “Thither flock the Mymensingias, without fuss, without tumult, without undue trouble to the

district revenue staff, a population which must amount to over half million has transplanted itself from Bengal to Assam during the last twenty five years.”

Among the north eastern States, only Assam has major plain land – characterised by fertile soil along the valleys of river Brahmaputra and the Barak. Islamic tradition has two distinctly observable traits in Assam. The one that as preserved by the people migrated to Assam during eighteen century who assimilated with the Assamese society in every possible way. This section is concentrated mainly in upper Assam region in Sibsagar and Jorhat district and spread to different urban centres later. The other is prominent among the immigrants who migrated to Assam at different times during the twentieth century and established their residence right from central Assam (Nagaon region) to the lower Assam region (Goalpara, Dhubri, etc).

The Objectives

The objectives of the present study are

- to examine the fertility rate of these two communities and factors affecting the rate, and
- to examine these two communities analysing the census data available with us in respect of two sets of districts set-I and Set-II. Set-I consist of Dhubri and Goalpara district and set –II consists of Jorhat and Sibsagar District.

Basic Census Data

Excepting Goalpara district, other three districts of our concern are more or less equal in their areas. But in respect of population and density both the sets of districts differ significantly.

Table – 3: Decadal Growth of Population (1991-2001)

<i>Set-I District</i>				<i>Set-II Districts</i>			
<i>Dhubri</i>		<i>Goalpara</i>		<i>Jorhat</i>		<i>Sibsagar</i>	
<i>1991</i>	<i>2001</i>	<i>1991</i>	<i>2001</i>	<i>1991</i>	<i>2001</i>	<i>1991</i>	<i>2001</i>
<i>1.32 m</i>	<i>1.63</i>	<i>0.67</i>	<i>0.82</i>	<i>0.87</i>	<i>1.00</i>	<i>0.91</i>	<i>1.05</i>
<i>Decadal Growth</i> <i>23.48</i>		<i>Decadal Growth</i> <i>22.39</i>		<i>Decadal Growth</i> <i>14.94%</i>		<i>Decadal Growth</i> <i>15.38%</i>	

The table above shows clearly the rate of growth of population in the set-I districts is much higher than the rate of growth in Set-II districts. There was about 23 percent growth in population during 1991-2001 in respect of Set-I districts i.e. Dhubri and Goalpara. While there was only around 15 percent growth in respect of Set-II districts during this period. The districts also vary greatly in respect of density of population per square kilometre as can be seen from following table.

Table-4: Area and density of the set-I and Set-II districts

	<i>Set-I districts</i>		<i>Set-II Districts</i>	
	<i>Dhubri</i>	<i>Goalpara</i>	<i>Jorhat</i>	<i>Sibsagar</i>
<i>Area (Sq Km)</i>	2838	1824	2851	2668
<i>Density (sq.km)</i>	470	366	306	340

This high rate of growth of population in the set-I district is mainly due to the high rate of growth of Muslim population in these two districts. The following table shows the details.

Table-5: Decadal growth of Muslim Population (in million)

District	1971	1991	%	2001	%
Dhubri	0.54	0.94	74.07	1.21	29.58
Goalpara	0.18	0.33	83.33	0.44	33.33
Jorhat	0.43	0.69	60.46	0.86	24.64
Sibsagar	0.25	0.37	48.04	0.47	27.02

Note: No census held in 1981.

The Abnormal Growth Rate

The growth rate of Muslim population in the set -I district between 1971- and 1991 was shocking – it was as high as 74.07 and 83.33 percent. But the growth rate in the set-II districts were much lower (60.46 % and 48.04 % respectively). In the subsequent decade however the growth rate in the set-I districts slowed down in both set-I and set-II districts but the rate of growth in set-I district still remained higher than the set-II districts.

High Fertility rate in Set –I districts

One among the major reasons behind the high growth of Muslim population in Set-I districts is the high fertility rate. The current fertility rate as calculated for the Muslim population in the set-II district are 3.2 for Jorhat district and 3.6 for the Sibsaigar district. While it is 5.3 and 4.9 for Muslim population of the Dhubri and Goalpara district respectively. This is reflected in the growth of infant population of the districts. As per 2001 census, total Muslim children of the age group 0-6 constitute 23.14 percent of the total Muslim population of the Dhubri district. Similar is the case with Goalpara district where it is 22.80 percent. In Jorhat district however, total Muslim children of 0 – 6 age group constitute only 12.63 percent of the total Muslim population of that district and in Sibsaigar district it is 12.16 percent. This is quite a significant gap between the Set-I and Set-II districts and is the major reason behind high growth of population.

This variation in fertility is observed despite religious homogeneity. This should rather be interpreted as the fertility differentials between fresh immigrants and the indigenous population. The high rate of literacy (54%) among the Muslims of Set-II district could be

referred as one of the main reasons behind this low fertility rate. Close association with the mainstream indigenous society for long time has impact on their living pattern. The low fertility rate of Assamese women i.e. 3.1-3.8 children per women, must have worked as demonstration effect. High prestige of Assamese women in the family and society may also have some impact on this.

The Muslim population in the Set-I districts mainly live in seclusion in river islands called “Chars” The “*dewanis*” or “*matbors*” are their leaders and also main source of executive power in the society. They are mainly illiterate persons having easy access to resources of the locality. He deals with the Government Officials on various matters concerning the village on behalf of the village or villagers. Their women are protected from various cultural influences - girls rarely attend regular schools. Maximum literacy level for girls is eighth or ninth standard. Once puberty is attained their movement is further restricted and they are considered marriageable.

There could be two reasons for this high fertility among the immigrants. The set-I districts as stated earlier provide vast tracts of lands to these populace for using it as farming. They are well settled in that environment which encourage high fertility and accordingly they adjust their fertility upward as per the prevailing family norms. Muslim communities are usually guided by the religious teachings in the matter of family Planning, etc. They are not directed to restrict their families. Religious teaching is one of the main reasons why usually Muslim families are large. In Islam there is no bar for raising more children. Thus they do not hesitate to go for more children. This is just opposite to the adoption theory of migration where the migrants in order to respond to the tough urban economic condition reduces number of children in the family. The families living in the set-I district in a condition of illiteracy or lower level of education ; their infant mortality rate is higher and thus gave birth earlier and also use less contraception.

The administrative factor responsible for higher fertility is mainly the absence of social infrastructures. The areas in the Set-I districts are remote and not easily accessible. Communication and transportation facility are almost nil. Villagers use small boats to reach the mainland. Healthcare facilities are rare- they have to come a long way to the main towns for accessing health cares. Infant mortality therefore is high in these areas which provoke them to have more children. Lower primary education is available but secondary education is not easy.

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